

# Weaving the Web into an EAP Reading Program

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As we enter the new millennium, there are two realities that few people would contest. The first is that English is an essential world language today. The second is that the Internet is here to stay. As university teachers of academic English, we decided to explore the possibilities of combining these two realities. This article describes the steps we have taken toward that goal.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), as taught at Bar Ilan University in Israel, emphasizes reading academic texts. This focus on reading has not allowed for a holistic approach in our curriculum, so the courses tend to lack variety. Even with carefully chosen materials, we often encounter low interest and motivation among both students and teachers when an entire course is based on teaching the skills needed for the comprehension of academic texts. (The advanced level course is 108 hours long—4 hours weekly for 27 weeks).

Some of us teaching at the advanced level at Bar Ilan began to discuss ways to better motivate and challenge the students as well as ourselves. We knew that certain conditions had to be satisfied. First, we wanted the material to be authentic and up-to-date. Second, we wanted the students to have more choice and greater autonomy in their reading. Furthermore, we had to make sure that the students were reading with a purpose and that their reading had meaning for them. No less important, we hoped that the reading would be enjoyable.

The computer, or more specifically the Internet, seemed to be the tool to meet these needs; and as we began exploring this possibility, we found that the professional literature supported our intuitions (Cummins and Sayers 1990, 1995). According to Vygotsky (1978), purposeful human learning is connected to activity and language is a crucial tool for learning. So, we decided to use the Internet to combine purposeful activity with language learning. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) also sees the classroom as a sociocultural environment in which collaboration and cooperative learning are made possible. The computer laboratory can develop into just such a collaborative environment, since teachers and students interact to explore various topics and exchange ideas about them. These concepts formed the rationale for our university Internet project.

## Initial problems and solutions

As we began to create the course materials and implement them in the lab, our group became involved in a dynamic, insightful learning process. From the start we discovered that developing materials was no straightforward task. Thus, to a great extent, the course evolved as a result of our experiences, which will be described below.

We faced a number of important questions. First, how and to what extent could we integrate the material into our existing EFL advanced reading comprehension program? Second, how could

we best utilize the computer facilities available to our department? Finally, what would be the reaction of our students?

We realized that it would be best to start modestly, so each member of our group of five instructors created a unit consisting of activities based on various Internet sites related to a particular topic. With five units, we would have sufficient material for our first year. To integrate our material into the EAP reading comprehension program at Bar Ilan, we chose topics related to those in the textbooks used by our EFL department. In addition, we developed units related to current world issues for which academic reading material would be readily available. Topics were also chosen based on their likely appeal and relevance to the students, and their availability on the Internet.

With regard to computer facilities, we knew that we could not exchange all our classroom hours for language laboratory time. To begin with, we still planned to use traditional teaching and learning methods which would not require the lab. In addition, the language laboratory was simply not available for our exclusive use. Our EFL department shared two computer labs, together containing approximately 50 terminals, with the rest of the Faculty of Humanities. Even within our department there were a number of advanced-level courses given at the same hour, thus necessitating a rotating schedule for laboratory use. As a result, each of our classes was allotted one laboratory slot approximately every three weeks and we planned accordingly.

Perhaps our greatest surprise was the reaction of the students. At the beginning of the semester we asked our students to fill out questionnaires detailing their familiarity with computers. Fortunately, the majority were eager to use the Internet. But we were shocked by their lack of computer literacy, since Israel is a technology-friendly society. Most elementary and high school curricula include computer instruction. Even families at the lower socioeconomic levels make a great effort to purchase a home computer. Despite all this, we discovered that even if students had computers at home, many did not know much about using them, beyond loading games. In fact, most of them did not know how to access the Internet.

As a result of the students' limited computer literacy, we had to add some introductory material. Today, our first unit includes familiarizing the students with the computer keyboard, using the mouse, explaining what the Internet is and how it works, accessing the Internet, locating various Web sites, and doing simple searches.

## **Implementation and insights**

When we finally began our content units, we found that flexibility and change would be integral to the success of our program. We had created units based on a theoretical concept; but we found that when put into practice, the material had to be adapted constantly. Thus, from the outset, the nature of the Internet, student reactions, and our own experience influenced the development of the material. We needed to account for the fact that Web sites change regularly, so we had to create material that would not be bound to any one aspect of a particular site (Sperling 1997). For example, for a unit on drug legalization, we originally directed students to a news item on a particular Web site and created an activity based on that item. But later we simply directed the students to the "Press" link, allowing them to choose any news clip available that day. The revised activities took into account the changing nature of the news on the Internet.

In retrospect we realized that this kind of flexibility was not only practical but beneficial, because students were given an element of choice. Since we viewed choice as important for learning, we allowed students to choose different topics. In addition to the drug unit described above, we developed units on other topical issues such as cloning, human rights, and the environment. As Collins, Brown and Newman (1989) note, "Carrying out tasks that reflect students' own personal interests encourages situated learning."

We found that entire classes as well as individual students within classes reacted differently to using the computer and the Internet. Some students needed to overcome their fear of the computer before they could progress at the rate we had originally intended, and other students were unable to progress independently. Again we had to adjust. Whereas we assumed originally that students would prefer to work individually, in fact, many of them worked more successfully in pairs. Because students collaborated, we needed to create activities that would allow them to explore sites together. The activities also demanded a reasonable amount of individual effort, however, because our department requires individual evaluation at the end of the course. Moreover, we had to ensure that the individual/pair work option was available to suit the nature of the class. As teachers, we are well aware that some classes have a dynamic which allows for fruitful group work, whereas others do not.

In addition, within our group of teachers we had to make the material flexible enough to adapt it to individual teaching styles. A case in point was an activity sheet created by one of our members. A particular section included open-ended questions meant to stimulate thought and provoke further exploration, but another teacher in our group felt that her students needed a tighter structure. The material had to be edited to allow for these differences.

Finally, we needed to account for lost time. Often our students were more curious about the material than we anticipated; they linked to other Web sites and ran out of class time before finishing an assignment. This meant that we had to create activities which could be completed outside of class without the help of an instructor. Again, these factors necessitated a serious effort to adapt the material accordingly.

## **Pedagogical implications**

As we gained experience with the Internet, so did our students. Their familiarity with the Internet and interest in the topics allowed for increased autonomy in choosing the individual Web sites and reading passages, as well as the type of activities to be completed. At the beginning of the semester we directed students to particular sites and guided them step-by-step to various links and activities. But by the end of the semester we designated a broad topic, suggested various sites and key words for searches, and let them choose the material and tasks they would engage in. We were pleased and impressed with the enthusiasm and seriousness with which our students managed their more independent academic assignments. We attribute their success to the purposeful and autonomous nature of the tasks (Ehrman 1996; McDevitt 1997).

Most significant was the fact that our students enjoyed reading in English. As one student commented, "I was learning English and didn't even feel it!" Our experience has shown us that the Internet gives our students choices about what they read, provides access to topics which are

relevant to them, and involves them in purposeful activities. All of these elements create the motivation which is essential to foreign language learning (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982; Ellis 1986).

## Conclusion

Clearly the Internet is an important tool which can encourage language learning. As with all innovative teaching tools, a sound theoretical base, careful planning, practicality, and flexibility are essential. If we expect to successfully incorporate this dynamic resource in our teaching repertoire, we must be prepared to accept the ramifications of its ever-changing nature. Using material which centers on the Internet demands a flexibility and an adaptability to change which was probably unimaginable 10 years ago. Compare Web sites, which may change weekly, to textbooks, which take years to revise! Good teachers regularly review and revise their materials, but the degree to which materials must be revamped once the Internet is routinely used may surprise even the most conscientious planner. Internet-related innovations appear regularly, and as we continue to learn more about this evolving medium, we will adapt our material accordingly. We welcome the opportunity to remain abreast of the latest developments so we can continue to engage our students in a meaningful EFL learning experience.

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**Note:** We invite teachers to examine our materials, which can be found at  
<http://www.biu.ac.il/HU/ef/weavin>

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